

Our Aromatic Uncle

By Henry Cuyler Bunner

[Footnote: From "Love in Old Cloathes and Other Stories," by F. C. Bunner. Copyright, 1896, by Charles Scribner's Sons.]

It is always with a feeling of personal tenderness and regret that I recall his story, although it began long before I was born, and must have ended shortly after that important date, and although I myself never laid eyes on the personage of whom my wife and I always speak as "The Aromatic Uncle."

The story begins so long ago, indeed, that I can tell it only as a tradition of my wife's family. It goes back to the days when Boston was so frankly provincial a town that one of its leading citizens, a man of eminent position and ancient family, remarked to a young kinsman whom he was entertaining at his hospitable board, by way of pleasing and profitable discourse: "Nephew, it may interest you to know that it is Mr. Everett who has the OTHER hindquarter of this lamb". This simple tale I will vouch for, for I got it from the lips of the nephew, who has been my uncle for so many years that I know him to be a trustworthy authority.

In those days which seem so far away--and yet the space between them and us is spanned by a lifetime of threescore years and ten-- life was simpler in all its details; yet such towns as Boston, already old, had well established local customs which varied not at all from year to year; many of which lingered in later phases of urban growth. In Boston, or at least in that part of Boston where my wife's family dwelt, it was the invariable custom for the head of the family to go to market in the early morning with his wife's list of the day's needs. When the list was filled, the articles were placed in a basket; and the baskets thus filled were systematically deposited by the marketboys at

the back door of the house to which they were consigned. Then the housekeeper came to the back door at her convenience, and took the basket in. Exposed as this position must have been, such a thing as a theft of the day's edibles was unknown, and the first authentic account of any illegitimate handling of the baskets brings me to the introduction of my wife's uncle.

It was on a summer morning, as far as I can find out, that a little butcher boy--a very little butcher boy to be driving so big a cart--stopped in the rear of two houses that stood close together in a suburban street. One of these houses belonged to my wife's father, who was, from all I can gather, a very pompous, severe, and generally objectionable old gentleman; a Judge, and a very considerable dignitary, who apparently devoted all his leisure to making life miserable for his family. The other was owned by a comparatively poor and unimportant man, who did a shipping business in a small way. He had bought it during a period of temporary affluence, and it hung on his hands like a white elephant. He could not sell it, and it was turning his hair gray to pay the taxes on it. On this particular morning he had got up at four o'clock to go down to the wharves to see if a certain ship in which he was interested had arrived. It was due and overdue, and its arrival would settle the question of his domestic comfort for the whole year; for if it failed to appear, or came home with an empty bottom, his fate would be hard indeed; but if it brought him money or marketable goods from its long Oriental trip, he might take heart of grace and look forward to better times.

When the butcher's boy stopped at the house of my wife's father, he set down at the back-door a basket containing fish, a big joint of roast beef, and a generous load of fruit and vegetables, including some fine, fat oranges. At the other door he left a rather unpromising-looking lump of steak and a half-peck of potatoes, not of the first quality. When he had deposited these two burdens he ran back and started his cart up the road.

But he looked back as he did so, and he saw a sight familiar to him, and saw the commission of a deed entirely unfamiliar. A handsome young boy of about his own age stepped out of the back-door of my wife's father's house and looked carelessly around him. He was one of the boys who compel the admiration of all other boys--strong, sturdy, and a trifle arrogant.

He had long ago compelled the admiration of the little butcher-boy. They had been playmates together at the public school, and although the Judge's son looked down from an infinite height upon his poor little comrade, the butcher-boy worshipped him with the deepest and most fervent adoration. He had for him the admiring reverence which the boy who can't lick anybody has for the boy who can lick everybody. He was a superior being, a pattern, a model; an ideal never to be achieved, but perhaps in a crude, humble way to be imitated. And there is no hero-worship in the world like a boy's worship of a boy-hero.

The sight of this fortunate and adorable youth was familiar enough to the butcher-boy, but the thing he did startled and shocked that poor little workingman almost as much as if his idol had committed a capital crime right before his very eyes. For the Judge's son suddenly let a look into his face that meant mischief, glanced around him to see whether anybody was observing him or not, and, failing to notice the butcher-boy, quickly and dexterously changed the two baskets. Then he went back into the house and shut the door on himself.

The butcher-boy reined up his horse and jumped from his cart. His first impulse, of course, was to undo the shocking iniquity which the object of his admiration had committed. But before he had walked back a dozen yards, it struck him that he was taking a great liberty in spoiling the other boy's joke. It was wrong, of course, he knew it; but was it for him to rebuke the wrong-doing of such an exalted personage? If the Judge's son came out again, he would see that his joke had miscarried, and then he would be displeased. And to the

butcher-boy it did not seem right in the nature of things that anything should displease the Judge's son. Three times he went hesitatingly backward and forward, trying to make up his mind, and then he made it up. The king could do no wrong. Of course he himself was doing wrong in not putting the baskets back where they belonged; but then he reflected, he took that sin on his own humble conscience, and in some measure took it off the conscience of the Judge's son--if, indeed, it troubled that lightsome conscience at all. And, of course, too, he knew that, being an apprentice, he would be whipped for it when the substitution was discovered. But he didn't mind being whipped for the boy he worshipped. So he drove out along the road; and the wife of the poor shipping-merchant, coming to the back-door, and finding the basket full of good things, and noticing especially the beautiful China oranges, naturally concluded that her husband's ship had come in, and that he had provided his family with a rare treat. And the Judge, when he came home to dinner, and Mrs. Judge introduced him to the rump-steak and potatoes--but I do not wish to make this story any more pathetic than is necessary.

A few months after this episode, perhaps indirectly in consequence of it--I have never been able to find out exactly--the Judge's son, my wife's uncle, ran away to sea, and for many years his recklessness, his strength, and his good looks were only traditions in the family, but traditions which he himself kept alive by remembrances than which none could have been more effective.

At first he wrote but seldom, later on more regularly, but his letters--I have seen many of them--were the most uncommunicative documents that I ever saw in my life. His wanderings took him to many strange places on the other side of the globe, but he never wrote of what he saw or did. His family gleaned from them that his health was good, that the weather was such-and-such, and that he wished to have his love, duty, and respects conveyed to his various relatives. In fact, the first positive bit of personal intelligence that they received from him was five years after his departure, when he wrote them from a Chinese

port on letter-paper whose heading showed that he was a member of a commercial firm. The letter itself made no mention of the fact. As the years passed on, however, the letters came more regularly and they told less about the weather, and were slightly--very slightly--more expressive of a kind regard for his relatives. But at the best they were cramped by the formality of his day and generation, and we of to-day would have called them cold and perfunctory.

But the practical assurances that he gave of his undiminished-- nay, his steadily increasing--affection for the people at home, were of a most satisfying character, for they were convincing proof not only of his love but of his material prosperity. Almost from his first time of writing he began to send gifts to all the members of the family. At first these were mere trifles, little curios of travel such as he was able to purchase out of a seaman's scanty wages; but as the years went on they grew richer and richer, till the munificence of the runaway son became the pride of the whole family.

The old house that had been in the suburbs of Boston was fairly in the heart of the city when I first made its acquaintance, and one of the famous houses of the town. And it was no wonder it was famous, for such a collection of Oriental furniture, bric-a-brac, and objects of art never was seen outside of a museum. There were ebony cabinets, book-cases, tables, and couches wonderfully carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. There were beautiful things in bronze and jade and ivory. There were all sorts of strange rugs and curtains and portieres. As to the china-ware and the vases, no house was ever so stocked; and as for such trifles as shawls and fans and silk handkerchiefs, why such things were sent not singly but by dozens.

No one could forget his first entrance into that house. The great drawing-room was darkened by heavy curtains, and at first you had only a dim vision of the strange and graceful shapes of its curious furnishing. But you could not but be instantly conscious of the delicate perfume that pervaded the apartment, and, for the matter of

that, the whole house. It was a combination of all the delightful Eastern smells--not sandalwood only, nor teak, nor couscous, but all these odors and a hundred others blent in one. Yet it was not heavy nor overpowering, but delightfully faint and sweet, diffused through those ample rooms. There was good reason, indeed, for the children of the generation to which my wife belonged to speak of the generous relative whom they had never seen as "Our Aromatic Uncle." There were other uncles, and I have no doubt they gave presents freely, for it was a wealthy and free-handed family; but there was no other uncle who sent such a delicate and delightful reminder with every gift, to breathe a soft memory of him by day and by night.

I did my courting in the sweet atmosphere of that house, and, although I had no earthly desire to live in Boston, I could not help missing that strangely blended odor when my wife and I moved into an old house in an old part of New York, whose former owners had no connections in the Eastern trade. It was a charming and home-like old house; but at first, although my wife had brought some belongings from her father's house, we missed the pleasant flavor of our aromatic uncle, for he was now my uncle, as well as my wife's. I say at first, for we did not miss it long. Uncle David--that was his name--not only continued to send his fragrant gifts to my wife at Christmas and upon her birthday, but he actually adopted me, too, and sent me Chinese cabinets and Chinese gods in various minerals and metals, and many articles designed for a smoker's use, which no smoker would ever want to touch with a ten-foot pole. But I cared very little about the utility of these presents, for it was not many years before, among them all, they set up that exquisite perfume in the house, which we had learned to associate with our aromatic uncle.

"FOO-CHOO-LI, CHINA, January-, 18-

"DEAR NEPHEW AND NIECE: The Present is to inform you that I have this day shipped to your address, per Steamer Ocean Queen, one marble and ebony Table, six assorted gods, and a blue Dinner set; also

that I purpose leaving this Country for a visit to the Land of my Nativity on the 6th of March next, and will, if same is satisfactory to you, take up my Abode temporarily in your household. Should same not be satisfactory, please cable at my charge. Messrs. Smithson & Smithson, my Customs Brokers, will attend to all charges on the goods, and will deliver them at your readiness. The health of this place is better than customary by reason of the cool weather, which Health I am as usual enjoying. Trusting that you both are at present in possession of the same Blessing, and will so continue, I remain, dear nephew and niece,

"Your affectionate "UNCLE."

This was, I believe, by four dozen words--those which he used to inform us of his intention of visiting America--the longest letter that Uncle David had ever written to any member of his family. It also conveyed more information about himself than he had ever given since the day he ran away to sea. Of course we cabled the old gentleman that we should be delighted to see him.

And, late that spring, at some date at which he could not possibly have been expected to arrive, he turned up at our house.

Of course we had talked a great deal about him, and wondered what manner of a man we should find him. Between us, my wife and I had got an idea of his personal appearance which I despair of conveying in words. Vaguely, I should say that we had pictured him as something mid-way between an abnormally tall Chinese mandarin and a benevolent Quaker. What we found when we got home and were told that our uncle from India was awaiting us, was a shrunken and bent old gentleman, dressed very cleanly and neatly in black broadcloth, with a limp, many-pleated shirt-front of old-fashioned style, and a plain black cravat. If he had worn an old-time stock we could have forgiven him the rest of the disappointment he cost us; but we had to admit to ourselves that he had the most absolutely commonplace

appearance of all our acquaintance. In fact, we soon discovered that, except for a taciturnity the like of which we had never encountered, our aromatic uncle had positively not one picturesque characteristic about him. Even his aroma was a disappointment. He had it, but it was patchouly or some other cheap perfume of the sort, wherewith he scented his handkerchief, which was not even a bandanna, but a plain decent white one of the unnecessarily large sort which clergymen and old gentlemen affect.

But, even if we could not get one single romantic association to cluster about him, we very soon got to like the old gentleman. It is true that at our first meeting, after saying "How d'ye do" to me and receiving in impassive placidity the kiss which my wife gave him, he relapsed into dead silence, and continued to smoke a clay pipe with a long stem and a short bowl. This instrument he filled and re-filled every few minutes, and it seemed to be his only employment. We plied him with questions, of course, but to these he responded with a wonderful brevity. In the course of an hour's conversation we got from him that he had had a pleasant voyage that it was not a long voyage, that it was not a short voyage, that it was about the usual voyage, that he had not been seasick, that he was glad to be back, and that he was not surprised to find the country very much changed. This last piece of information was repeated in the form of a simple "No," given in reply to the direct question; and although it was given politely, and evidently without the least unamiable intent, it made us both feel very cheap. After all, it WAS absurd to ask a man if he were surprised to find the country changed after fifty or sixty years of absence. Unless he was an idiot, and unable to read at that, he must have expected something of the sort.

But we grew to like him. He was thoroughly kind and inoffensive in every way. He was entirely willing to be talked to, but he did not care to talk. If it was absolutely necessary, he COULD talk, and when he did talk he always made me think of the "French-English Dictionary for the Pocket," compiled by the ingenious Mr. John Bellows; for

nobody except that extraordinary Englishman could condense a greater amount of information into a smaller number of words. During the time of his stay with us I think I learned more about China than any other man in the United States knew, and I do not believe that the aggregate of his utterances in the course of that six months could have amounted to one hour's continuous talk. Don't ask me for the information. I had no sort of use for it, and I forgot it as soon as I could. I like Chinese bric-a-brac, but my interest in China ends there.

Yet it was not long before Uncle David slid into his own place in the family circle. We soon found that he did not expect us to entertain him. He wanted only to sit quiet and smoke his pipe, to take his two daily walks by himself, and to read the daily paper one afternoon and Macaulay's "History of England" the next. He was never tired of sitting and gazing amiably but silently at my wife; and, to head the list of his good points, he would hold the baby by the hour, and for some mysterious reason that baby, who required the exhibition of seventeen toys in a minute to be reasonably quiet in the arms of anybody else, would sit placidly in Uncle David's lap, teething away steadily on the old gentleman's watch-chain, as quiet and as solemn and as aged in appearance as any one of the assorted gods of porcelain and jade and ivory which our aromatic uncle had sent us.

The old house in Boston was a thing of the past. My wife's parents had been dead for some years, and no one remained of her immediate family except a certain Aunt Lucretia, who had lived with them until shortly before our marriage, when the breaking up of the family sent her West to find a home with a distant relative in California. We asked Uncle Davy if he had stopped to see Aunt Lucretia as he came through California. He said he had not. We asked him if he wanted to have Aunt Lucretia invited on to pass a visit during his stay with us. He answered that he did not. This did not surprise us at all. You might think that a brother might long to see a sister from whom he had been separated nearly all of a long lifetime, but then you might never have met Aunt Lucretia. My wife made the offer only from a sense of duty;

and only after a contest with me which lasted three days and nights. Nothing but loss of sleep during an exceptionally busy time at my office induced me to consent to her project of inviting Aunt Lucretia. When Uncle David put his veto upon the proposition I felt that he might have taken back all his rare and costly gifts, and I could still have loved him.

But Aunt Lucretia came, all the same. My wife is afflicted with a New England conscience, originally of a most uncomfortable character. It has been much modified and ameliorated, until it is now considerably less like a case of moral hives; but some wretched lingering remnant of the original article induced her to write to Aunt Lucretia that Uncle David was staying with us, and of course Aunt Lucretia came without invitation and without warning, dropping in on us with ruthless unexpectedness.

You may not think, from what I have said, that Aunt Lucretia's visit was a pleasant event. But it was, in some respects; for it was not only the shortest visit she ever paid us, but it was the last with which she ever honored us.

She arrived one morning shortly after breakfast, just as we were preparing to go out for a drive. She would not have been Aunt Lucretia if she had not upset somebody's calculations at every turn of her existence. We welcomed her with as much hypocrisy as we could summon to our aid on short notice, and she was not more than usually offensive, although she certainly did herself full justice in telling us what she thought of us for not inviting her as soon as we even heard of Uncle David's intention to return to his native land. She said she ought to have been the first to embrace her beloved brother--to whom I don't believe she had given one thought in more years than I have yet seen.

Uncle David was dressing for his drive. His long residence in tropical countries had rendered him sensitive to the cold, and although it was a

fine, clear September day, with the thermometer at about sixty, he was industriously building himself up with a series of overcoats. On a really snappy day I have known him to get into six of these garments; and when he entered the room on this occasion I think he had on five, at least.

My wife had heard his familiar foot on the stairs, and Aunt Lucretia had risen up and braced herself for an outburst of emotional affection. I could see that it was going to be such a greeting as is given only once in two or three centuries, and then on the stage. I felt sure it would end in a swoon, and I was looking around for a sofa-pillow for the old lady to fall upon, for from what I knew of Aunt Lucretia I did not believe she had ever swooned enough to be able to go through the performance without danger to her aged person. But I need not have troubled myself. Uncle David toddled into the room, gazed at Aunt Lucretia without a sign of recognition in his features, and toddled out into the hall, where he got his hat and gloves, and went out to the front lawn, where he always paced up and down for a few minutes before taking a drive, in order to stimulate his circulation. This was a surprise, but Aunt Lucretia's behavior was a greater surprise. The moment she set eyes on Uncle David the theatrical fervor went out of her entire system, literally in one instant; and an absolutely natural, unaffected astonishment displayed itself in her expressive and strongly marked features. For almost a minute, until the sound of Uncle David's footsteps had died away, she stood absolutely rigid; while my wife and I gazed at her spellbound.

Then Aunt Lucretia pointed one long bony finger at me, and hissed out with a true feminine disregard of grammar:

"That ain't HIM!"

"David," said Aunt Lucretia, impressively, "had only one arm. He lost the other in Madagascar."

I was too dumfounded to take in the situation. I remember thinking, in a vague sort of way, that Madagascar was a curious sort of place to go for the purpose of losing an arm; but I did not apprehend the full significance of this disclosure until I heard my wife's distressed protestations that Aunt Lucretia must be mistaken; there must be some horrible mistake somewhere.

But Aunt Lucretia was not mistaken, and there was no mistake anywhere. The arm had been lost, and lost in Madagascar, and she could give the date of the occurrence, and the circumstances attendant. Moreover, she produced her evidence on the spot. It was an old daguerreotype, taken in Calcutta a year or two after the Madagascar episode. She had it in her hand-bag, and she opened it with fingers trembling with rage and excitement. It showed two men standing side by side near one of those three-foot Ionic pillars that were an indispensable adjunct of photography in its early stages. One of the men was large, broad-shouldered, and handsome-- unmistakably a handsome edition of Aunt Lucretia. His empty left sleeve was pinned across his breast. The other man was, making allowance for the difference in years, no less unmistakably the Uncle David who was at that moment walking to and fro under our windows. For one instant my wife's face lighted up.

"Why, Aunt Lucretia," she cried, "there he is! That's Uncle David, dear Uncle David."

"There he is NOT," replied Aunt Lucretia. "That's his business partner--some common person that he picked up on the ship he first sailed in--and, upon my word, I do believe it's that wretched creature outside. And I'll Uncle David HIM."

She marched out like a grenadier going to battle, and we followed her meekly. There was, unfortunately, no room for doubt in the case. It only needed a glance to see that the man with one arm was a member

of my wife's family, and that the man by his side, OUR Uncle David, bore no resemblance to him in stature or features.

Out on the lawn Aunt Lucretia sailed into the dear old gentleman in the five overcoats with a volley of vituperation. He did not interrupt her, but stood patiently to the end, listening, with his hands behind his back; and when, with her last gasp of available breath, Aunt Lucretia demanded:

"Who--who--who ARE you, you wretch?" he responded, calmly and respectfully:

"I'm Tommy Biggs, Miss Lucretia."

But just here my wife threw herself on his neck and hugged him, and cried:

"You're my own dear Uncle David, ANYWAY!"

It was a fortunate, a gloriously fortunate, inspiration. Aunt Lucretia drew herself up in speechless scorn, stretched forth her bony finger, tried to say something and failed, and then she and her hand-bag went out of my gates, never to come in again.

When she had gone, our aromatic uncle--for we shall always continue to think of him in that light, or rather in that odor-- looked thoughtfully after her till she disappeared, and then made one of the few remarks I ever knew him to volunteer.

"Ain't changed a mite in forty-seven years."

Up to this time I had been in a dazed condition of mind. As I have said, my wife's family was extinct save for herself and Aunt Lucretia, and she remembered so little of her parents, and she looked herself so little like Aunt Lucretia, that it was small wonder that neither of us

remarked Uncle David's unlikeness to the family type. We knew that he did not resemble the ideal we had formed of him; and that had been the only consideration we had given to his looks. Now, it took only a moment of reflection to recall the fact that all the members of the family had been tall and shapely, and that even between the ugly ones, like Aunt Lucretia, and the pretty ones, like my wife, there was a certain resemblance. Perhaps it was only the nose--the nose is the brand in most families, I believe--but whatever it was, I had only to see my wife and Aunt Lucretia together to realize that the man who had passed himself off as our Uncle David had not one feature in common with either of them--nor with the one-armed man in the daguerreotype. I was thinking of this, and looking at my wife's troubled face, when our aromatic uncle touched me on the arm.

"I'll explain," he said, "to you. YOU tell HER."

We dismissed the carriage, went into the house, and sat down. The old gentleman was perfectly cool and collected, but he lit his clay pipe, and reflected for a good five minutes before he opened his mouth. Then he began:

"Finest man in the world, sir. Finest BOY in the world. Never anything like him. But, peculiarities. Had 'em. Peculiarities. Wouldn't write home. Wouldn't"--here he hesitated--"send things home. I had to do it. Did it for him. Didn't want his folks to know. Other peculiarities. Never had any money. Other peculiarities. Drank. Other peculiarities. Ladies. Finest man in the world, all the same. Nobody like him. Kept him right with his folks for thirty-one years. Then died. Fever. Canton. Never been myself since. Kept right on writing, all the same. Also"--here he hesitated again--"sending things. Why? Don't know. Been a fool all my life. Never could do anything but make money. No family, no friends. Only HIM. Ran away to sea to look after him. Did look after him. Thought maybe your wife would be some like him. Barring peculiarities, she is. Getting old. Came here for company. Meant no harm. Didn't calculate on Miss Lucretia."

Here he paused and smoked reflectively for a minute or two.

"Hot in the collar--Miss Lucretia. Haughty. Like him, some. Just like she was forty-seven years ago. Slapped my face one day when I was delivering meat, because my jumper wasn't clean. Ain't changed a mite."

This was the first condensed statement of the case of our aromatic uncle. It was only in reply to patient, and, I hope, loving, gentle, and considerate, questioning that the whole story came out--at once pitiful and noble--of the poor little butcher-boy who ran away to sea to be body-guard, servant, and friend to the splendid, showy, selfish youth whom he worshipped; whose heartlessness he cloaked for many a long year, who lived upon his bounty, and who died in his arms, nursed with a tenderness surpassing that of a brother. And as far as I could find out, ingratitude and contempt had been his only reward.

I need not tell you that when I repeated all this to my wife she ran to the old gentleman's room and told him all the things that I should not have known how to say--that we cared for him; that we wanted him to stay with us; that he was far, far more our uncle than the brilliant, unprincipled scapegrace who had died years before, dead for almost a lifetime to the family who idolized him; and that we wanted him to stay with us as long as kind heaven would let him. But it was of no use. A change had come over our aromatic uncle which we could both of us see, but could not understand. The duplicity of which he had been guilty weighed on his spirit. The next day he went out for his usual walk, and he never came back. We used every means of search and inquiry, but we never heard from him until we got this letter from Foo-choo-li:

"DEAR NEPHEW AND NIECE: The present is to inform you that I am enjoying the Health that might be expected at my Age, and in my condition of Body, which is to say bad. I ship you by to-day's steamer,

Pacific Monarch, four dozen jars of ginger, and two dozen ditto preserved oranges, to which I would have added some other Comfits, which I purposed offering for your acceptance, if it were not that my Physician has forbidden me to leave my Bed. In case of Fatal Results from this trying Condition, my Will, duly attested, and made in your favor, will be placed in your hands by Messrs. Smithson & Smithson, my Customs Brokers, who will also pay all charges on goods sent. The Health of this place being unfavorably affected by the Weather, you are unlikely to hear more from,

"Dear Nephew and Niece,

"Your affectionate "UNCLE."

And we never did hear more--except for his will--from Our Aromatic Uncle; but our whole house still smells of his love.